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G Puxon support letter.

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I have been requested to provide background information relating to an asylum appeal by Osmani Demira Osman, a Rom, born in 1957 in Presevo, Serbia.

Osman was formerly the secretary of the Romani association "Demiri Saciresor" and did work for the Red Cross in Presevo. He gained the hostility of the then Yugoslav authorities because, during the Milosevic era, he opposed the conscription of Roma into the JNA, the Yugoslav National Army. It was because the Yugoslav police arrested him, and he was able to escape, that Osman fled the country and sought asylum; first in Denmark and then in Norway.

He has been out of Serbia for six years and faces imprisonment should he be returned there. Osman has a wife, Elizabeta, born in 1959, and two children; Danijel born 1983 and Edmond born 1987.

I am aware of my duty as an expert to assist those considering his case to obtain as complete a picture as possible, within my capabilities, of the relevant past and present circumstances in the general area of the Presevo Valley, southern Serbia.

As to general background, I draw upon my own visits to the Presevo Valley region, a stay of over a year in the southern Serbian city of Nis, and frequent travel between Nis and Skopje, through Kumanov, Presevo town, Bujanovac, Vranje and Leskovac. I keep in touch with Roma and Romani organizations in Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia and am concerned with the problems of Kosovo Roma refugees. I have asked for, and received an update this month on the situation in the Presevo Valley and the bordering area of northern Kosovo from Osman Balic, head of the Romani association in Nis and a member of the city's municipality.

While I have been an active participant in the political affairs of Roma for some 40 years this factor has not unduly influenced what I have set out here. I am a journalist (now retired) by profession and am the co-author of **Destiny of Europe's Gypsies**, published by Chatto & Heinemann in 1972, available in eight languages and regarded as the standard work on the Nazi persecution of Roma. From 1971 to 1981 I was general-secretary of the World Romani Congress and International Romani Union. In 1984 I acted as a consultant with the US Department of Justice in the Artukovic case. My second language is Romanian and I speak Serbian.

From my visits to the region in the 1970s, I know that Roma of Osman's parents generation who had the same first and second names as ethnic Albanians, i.e names which would be recognised as Muslim, were under a lot of pressure, including physical threats, to declare themselves on Census returns as ethnic Albanians. This form of statistical assimilation, which is still going on, was widespread. I call it statistical assimilation because it relates only to numbers. The militant Albanian groups strive to win the battle of the statistics, for political purposes, by forcing Roma to declare themselves officially as ethnic Albanian. Compliance make some difference to their acceptance in a given locality.

The current position of Roma in Presevo. and nearby villages, is described by Balic as "catastrophic". He says the whole region is in a state of crisis due to the activities of armed Albanian groups and the counter-measures being taken against them by Serbian police and paramilitary forces. Roma have been caught in the middle of this strife and come under attack from both sides. Recently elections were held in northern Kosovo, which added to the tension in the area.

As Osman says, his family were called *gypsies*, in the most derogatory sense; the words used being *magjupi* in Albanian and *cigani* in Serbian.

In the Presevo Valley, situated in the "corner" of territory in southern Serbia, bordered by Kosovo and Macedonia, an ethnic-based struggles has been going on for decades. In 1999, large numbers of Roma were ethnically-cleansed from Kosovo and remain as refugees, or internally displaced persons, in Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia.

Since then, armed ethnic-Albanian insurgents, belonging to a variety of paramilitary groups, have harassed the non-Albanian population in Presevo, as well as parts of Macedonia, including many villages.

Those Roma with Muslim-style names are not accepted, and do not attempt to be accepted as a general rule, at the local mosque (djamia) for Friday prayer. However, boys are circumcised (suneti) and burials take place in the Muslim cemeteries. At the same time certain Christian saint's days are celebrated, notably St George's Day (Herdelezi), St. Vasil's Day and the Day of the Virgin Mary (15 August). I have myself attended the annual pilgrimage to Letnica, in northern Kosovo, which takes place on 15 August, in the company of Muslim Roma, including my in-laws

The insurgency has waxed and waned over the last several years and has rendered the Presovo Valley a lawless area, as media reports confirm. In February 2001, three Serbian police officers were killed by a mine between Lucane village and Bujanovac. The same week the police station at Sveti Ilija, six miles from Vranje, was attacked.

In the summer of 2003, attacks again increased, with paramilitary groups using bases just over the border in Kosovo for training and regrouping. The Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Nebojsa Covic, said in a statement in Brussels on 27 February 2003 that the situation in the area of Presevo was returning to the state of lawlessness experienced two years ago.

He said that criminal and radical elements among the ethnic-Albanian population were once more trying to destabilise the region. Death-threats, explosions, landmines, violent attacks on police and citizens were on the increase. Two members of the security forces had recently been murdered and two others wounded. Mr Covic blamed this activity mostly on a relatively new formation, the Albanian National Army. In addition, organized crime elements were using the Presevo Valley for drug, arms and sex trafficking, causing a serious problem.

This generalised statement is consistent with information which I have received from Roma political activists and others in Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo. This speaks of a large paramilitary group in Kosovo, referred to as the "new army" or Albanian National Army. It is said that KFOR patrols have been intimidated by the ANA to the extent that on a number of highways KFOR troops on a regular basis "disappear" around 9 pm each night and the ANA set up roadblocks, looking for 'collaborationist' Albanians, Serbs and Roma.

Roma are also being visited in their homes and warned to leave or be killed. Hundreds are in the process of packing up and departing Kosovo, some for a second time. In relation to the 700 Kosovo Roma refugees who camped 'illegally' on the Macedonian Greek border at Medzitlija (with whom I was in contact almost daily), Michael Steiner, the UN administrator of Kosovo has said that the province is not safe for returning Roma as he cannot guarantee their security. At the same time, the Serbian Government has said it cannot accept Roma refugees because it already has 700,000 internally displaced persons to deal with.

I note that the UK Secretary of State has already concluded in the case of Fatjon Halimi, a minor, that he is not satisfied adequate reception arrangements in Serbia are available. That is indeed what I would conclude adding that the recently increased activity of the paramilitary forces makes it very dangerous for Osman to return to Presevo. On the one hand the insurgents are targeting Roma, as well as Serbs, and on the other the local Serbian police cannot provide adequate security, especially in places like Presevo, which has historically included a Romani community.

The Serbian Government has said categorically it will not accept Roma refugees from Macedonia although they have Serbian citizenship.

It would seem necessary in the case of Osman to ascertain from the Serbian authorities, in advance of any discussion about his returning, whether they are willing to accept him and to take due steps for his integration back into society there.

Finally, as a summing up, I would stress that the Presevo Valley is inherently insecure because of the nature of its borders with Kosovo and Macedonia. These new frontiers are porous, the Crna Gora mountains used as cover and refuge by both armed militia and smugglers, who are often enough one and the same. The situation in northern Kosovo, currently the most hotly contested area of the province, is likely to continue to destabilise this part of southern Serbia for years to come.